What is Claimed is:

1. A releasable retarder for resisting movement of railway cars moving along first and second running rails of a section of railway track, said releasable retarder comprising:

first and second shoe beams supported adjacent to said running rails;

a plurality of pairs of shoes carried by said shoe beams in a parallel, spaced relation with the first and second running rails;

a bias structure biasing the shoe beams toward the running rails, trapping wheels of a railway car entering the retarder between the running rails and the shoes carried by the shoe beams and applying a frictional force to the railway car wheels for slowing or stopping the railway car; and

an operating mechanism for moving the shoe beams between a home position in which the shoes are positioned to engage the railway car wheels, and a release position in which the bias force is released, allowing the railway car to move freely through the retarder.

2. The releasable retarder of claim 1, wherein the said operating mechanism includes at least one drive mechanism and a common operating member which couples the drive mechanism to the bias structure.

3. The releasable retarder of claim 2, wherein the drive mechanism includes a plurality of rams coupled to said common operating member.

4. The releasable retarder of claim 3, wherein the rams are bidirectional devices, allowing the retarder to function in a service mode in which the operating mechanism moves the shoe beams outwardly, relative to the running rails, allowing the insertion of shims between the bian structure and a support structure.

5. The releasable retarder of claim 2, wherein the bias structure includes a plurality of spring packs each including at least one spring.

6. The releasable retarder of claim 5, wherein the drive mechanism couples the rams to the spring packs for causing the springs to be compressed, drawing the shoe beams inwardly away from the running rails to the release position.

7. The releasable retarder of claim 5, wherein the spring packs are mounted to allow the springs to produce an outwardly directed force on the shoe beams.

8. The releasable retarder of claim 2, wherein the operating member is supported near the centerline of the railway track section.

9. The releasable retarder of claim 1, wherein the rams are bidirectional devices, allowing the retarder to function in a service mode in which the operating mechanism moves the shoe beams to a service position outwardly, allowing the insertion of shims to compensate for wear on the shoes.

10. The releasable retarder of claim 5, wherein said operating mechanism includes a plurality of lever systems, and the common operating member is coupled to the spring packs through the lever systems.

11. The releasable retarder of claim 1, wherein said shoes are removably mounted on said shoe beams.

12. A releasable retarder for resisting movement of a railway car moving along first and second running rails of a railway track, said releasable retarder comprising:

first and second shoe beams supported adjacent to said running rails;

a plurality of pairs of shoes carried by said shoe beams in a parallel, spaced relation with first and second running rails;

a plurality of springs biasing the shoe beams toward the running rails, trapping wheels of a railway car entering the retarder between the shoes carried by the shoe beams and the running rails and applying a frictional force to the railway car wheels for stopping the railway car and retaining the railway car in the retarder; and

an operating mechanism for moving the shoe beams between a home position in which the shoes are positioned to engage the railway car wheels, and a release position in which the spring force is released, allowing the railway car to move freely through the retarder, said operating mechanism including a plurality of rams and a common operating member which couples the rams to the spring packs, for causing the springs to be compressed, drawing the shoe beams inwardly away from the running rails to the release position.

13. The releasable retarder of claim 12, wherein said operating mechanism includes a plurality of lever systems, and the common operating member is coupled to the spring packs through the lever systems.

14. The releasable retarder of claim 12, wherein the rams are bidirectional devices, allowing the retarder to function in a service mode in which the operating mechanism moves the shoe beams to a service position, allowing the insertion of shims to compensate for wear on the shoes.

15. The releasable retarder of claim 12 wherein said shoes are removably mounted on said shoe beams.

16 A releasable retarder for resisting movement of a railway car moving along first and second running rails of a railway track, said releasable retarder comprising:

first and second shoe beams supported adjacent to said running rails;

a plurality of pairs of shoes carried by said shoe beams in parallel, spaced relation with first and second running rails;

a bias structure biasing the shoe beams toward the running rails, trapping wheels of the railway car entering the retarder between the running rails and the shoes carried by the shoe beams and applying a frictional force to the railway car wheels for stopping the railway car, retaining the railway car in the retarder; and

an operating mechanism for moving the shoe beams between a home position in which the shoes are positioned to engage the railway car wheels, and a release position in which the bias force is released, allowing the railway car to move freely through the retarder, wherein the rams are bidirectional devices, allowing the retarder to function in a service mode in which the operating mechanism moves the shoe beams to a service position, allowing the insertion of shims.